Draft Assessment Forest Plan Revision

Recreation Settings, Opportunities, Access, and Scenic Character

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for: Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests

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Re	ecreation Settings, Opportunities, Access, and Scenic Character	2
	Introduction	2
	Primary Sources	2
	Secondary Sources	3
	Scale	3
	Current Forest Plan Direction	1
	Existing Condition	1
	Recreation	1
	Developed Recreation	5
	Dispersed Recreation	5
	Backcountry Recreation	5
	Hunting and Fishing	5
	Roads and Trails Access	7
	Recreation Settings and Opportunities	3
	Scenic Character	9
	Key Benefits to People	2
	Risks and Stressors	3
	Trends and Drivers14	1
	Information Needs15	5
	Key Findings16	5
	Literature Cited	5

Recreation Settings, Opportunities, Access, and Scenic Character

Introduction

This assessment provides information on many aspects of recreation and focuses on those specifically referenced in the 2012 Planning Rule:

- Sustainable Recreation The set of recreation settings and opportunities on National Forest System lands that is ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable for present and future generations.
- Recreation Setting The social, managerial, and physical attributes of a place that, when combined, provide a distinct set of recreation opportunities. The Forest Service uses the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) to define recreation settings and categorize them into classes.
 - Scenic Character The combination of the physical, biological, and cultural images that gives an area its scenic identity and contributes to its sense of place. Scenic character provides a frame of reference from which to determine scenic attractiveness and to measure scenic integrity.
 - Recreation Opportunity Spectrum A Forest Service process used to define recreation settings and categorize them into classes or subgroups.
- Recreation Opportunity A specific recreation activity in a particular recreation setting pursued to enjoy the desired recreation experiences and other benefits that accrue. Recreation opportunities include nonmotorized, motorized, developed, and dispersed recreation on land, water, and in the air.
- Recreation Access The systems of roads and trails on which people travel to access certain recreation settings and opportunities.
- Process and Methods

Primary Sources

National Visitor Use Monitoring Reports: We use national visit monitoring data throughout this document. National visitor use monitoring provides the most relevant, reliable, and accurate information on visitation on the forests within the Blue Mountains visitation. We collect national visitor use monitoring data using a random sampling method that yields statistically valid results at the individual national forest level, depending on an accurate sample design.

INFRA: We use a database application called "INFRA" to house information on developed facilities and natural resources, such as buildings, campgrounds, day use sites, interpretive sites, trails, roads, and wilderness areas.

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum: We use the Forest Service recreation opportunity spectrum classification system to describe the different recreation settings that are available on a given landscape and the differing levels of development of constructed recreation facilities.

Motor Vehicle Use Maps and Travel Management Plans: The Forest Service Travel Management Rule, published in 2005, requires each national forest or ranger district to designate roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicles. The rule requires we publish a motor vehicle use map (36 CFR 212.56), which identifies motorized route/area designations. It also provides us with the authority to regulate use of over-snow vehicles on forest system roads and trails and in designated areas on the National Forest (36 CFR 212.81). A Travel analysis reports (TAR) was completed for each of the three forests in 2015 as required in Subpart A of the Travel Management Rule (2005). The TAR assesses the current transportation system and identifies the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel and for administration, utilization, and protection of National Forest System lands and defines opportunities to achieve a more sustainable system of roads on the forests. Additionally, the TAR provides information that allows integration of ecological, social, and economic concerns into future decision making. The Umatilla National Forest completed Subpart B of the Travel Management Rule in 2015 and released National Vehicle Use Maps completing their travel management planning process. Malheur and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests will complete travel management planning after forest planning is complete.

Secondary Sources

- State Travel and Tourism Reports.
- State comprehensive outdoor recreation plans, the latest published for both Washington and Oregon.
- Trailhead registry data.
- Campground use logs and fee envelopes.
- Recreation pass sales.
- Outfitter and guide actual use data.
- Relevant analysis or information offered for consideration by the public about recreation or scenic character.

Scale

Recreation information is presented at three geographic scales: region wide, forest-wide and by geographic area. The region wide scale provides information on the larger analysis area (that of the three national forests in the Blue Mountains). Forest-wide scale provides information on relevant Forest Service process, policy, and overall direction for recreation in the "plan area" (individual forest) and recreation information by geographic area is more detailed and pertains to specific areas.

Current Forest Plan Direction

Recreation Settings and Opportunities: The 1990 Forest Plans for Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests have inconsistent approaches to developed recreation sites. There is a management area designated specifically for developed recreation sites for the Malheur and Umatilla National Forests. Developed recreation sites are included in a management area with other administrative sites for Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. Facility infrastructure continues to have a backlog of deferred maintenance needs. Sites are slowly coming into conformance with Americans with Disabilities Act standards. Capital improvement projects have upgraded some high use sites and agreements with other recreation providers and volunteer groups have resulted in improved sites at many locations. See detailed Infrastructure report for more information.

Scenic Character: The 1990 forest plans utilized the Visual Management System which included visual quality objectives. The 1990 plans include requirements for limitations on the types and size of activities in visual foreground retention and partial retention areas.

The 1990 Forest Plans for the Malheur and Umatilla National Forests include management area allocations for nonmotorized recreation that are primitive in nature, while the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest 1990 Forest Plan does not. There are management areas within all three National Forests that are allocated for motor vehicle recreation that are primitive in nature, or classified as backcountry, with very low densities of motor vehicle roads. The Umatilla National Forest is closed to cross-country motor vehicle travel, unless posted open. In contrast, the travel management approach for Malheur and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests has been that areas are open to cross-country motor vehicle travel unless closed by order. All three National Forests have road density limitations as plan components, although they vary by forest. Refer to Infrastructure report for more specific quantity information.

Existing Condition

Recreation

Generally, recreation user satisfaction across the Blue Mountains national forests is good or very good regarding developed day use and overnight sites. Visitor satisfaction regarding dispersed recreation is of a wider range with more recreation visitors expressing an average, good, or very good level of satisfaction with the general forest condition. Wilderness visitors rated their satisfaction as good or very good, with notable dissatisfaction about forest-wide road conditions and signage adequacy, although signage adequacy was determined to be low priority on the importance-performance rating. There were also concerns with overcrowding, mainly in overnight use developed sites. (USDA Forest Service 2019.

Developed Recreation

The developed recreation setting is primarily found in areas accessible to motor vehicles and adjacent to primary roads and highways. This recreational experience is generally accommodated by facilities that provide comfort and convenience for the visitor in the outdoor environment. Developed recreation sites in this setting developed campgrounds; trails, ski areas; snow parks; resorts and recreation residences. The facilities generally have more constructed amenities than elsewhere within the national forests, which enhance the visitor's experience. Examples of enhanced amenities include interpretive sites and overlooks along scenic byways, downhill ski areas, and lodges and resorts that are managed by commercial operators. The environmental surroundings are usually scenic in nature, such as scenic ridgetops, river corridors, or lakes. The social setting generally involves frequent contact with other recreation users who expect to share the facilities. The primary activities available within these settings are camping, boating and fishing, snowmobiling, downhill skiing, biking, driving for pleasure, and viewing wildlife and scenery.

Developed recreation settings are typically the most well-known and heavily used sites within the national forests. This type of concentrated use requires ongoing maintenance to meet user expectations. For example, few of the facilities offered currently accommodate the size and length of modern recreation vehicles and most are not yet fully accessible for visitors with disabilities. Some crowding is experienced and expected, and the cleanliness of the sites may be impacted for short periods during peak use. Resource impacts are also more frequent due to heavy use near lakes and streams that can cause impacts to stream banks, riparian vegetation, beaches, fish spawning areas, and overall water quality.

About four percent of visitors elect to camp in developed sites as their primary recreation activity, with 10 to 20 percent camping at developed sites while participating in other activities.

Dispersed Recreation

Dispersed recreation settings offer a broad array of opportunities to users who require few developed site amenities. National forest dispersed campsites, off-highway vehicle trailheads, and wayside interpretive sites are examples of minimally developed facilities that are rustic in nature yet appeal to those wanting to be more self-sufficient. The sites lack plumbing, paved surfaces, or potable water sources found in the developed recreation setting. These areas are accessed via secondary or primitive roads and trails. Scenic and recreation river corridors also occur within this setting. Many activities occur here that people associate with a primitive or self-reliant dispersed activity. Peak periods can occur during fall hunting seasons when larger groups tend to congregate for hunting in traditional locations. During the rest of the year, campsites and activities are more dispersed, and social encounters tend to be infrequent.

Visitors seek these settings to participate in a wide variety of activities, such as hiking, hunting, backpacking, stock packing, gathering forest products, biking, off-highway vehicle riding, fishing, and

viewing scenery and wildlife. Outfitter and guide services also provide commercial services for hunting, fishing, day rides, and river boating and rafting.

Site amenities and road access in these settings are infrequently maintained, which can result in resource damage due to heavy use of dispersed sites and off-highway vehicle use off roads and trails.

National forest roads and trails comprise between 50 and 70 percent of facilities used by dispersed recreation users on the national forests throughout the Blue Mountains. Common facility use includes visitors using scenic byways, picnic areas, snowmobile areas and trails, and frequenting developed fishing sites such as boat ramps and fishing docks.

Backcountry Recreation

Backcountry recreation includes use of roaded and unroaded backcountry, and designated wilderness areas. While the National Visitor Use Monitoring does not distinguish between backcountry roaded and unroaded visits, there is a distinction for designated wilderness area use. There were 42,000 wilderness area site visits in 2019 to the national forests in the Blue Mountains (USDA Forest Service 2019).

Backcountry recreation occurs in the least developed setting and provides the greatest opportunity for solitude, risk, and challenge in environments of rugged, undeveloped landscapes. These landscapes are often deep, isolated canyons, heavily forested plateaus, and rocky ridgelines. There are minimal facilities, creating more self-reliance and challenge for visitors. Facilities, which are considered rustic or primitive in nature, such as information or direction signs, rustic toilets, and trails, may be found. In roaded backcountry, secondary roads provide access to small trailheads with only minimal directional signage. Trails for motor vehicle use and trails where motor vehicle use is prohibited are available in some areas but are not always open or maintained. Activities available in these areas, such as hunting and fishing, mountain biking, off-highway vehicle riding, trail riding and stock packing, and river boating and rafting, often require self-reliance and higher levels of outdoor skills.

Although less frequent than at dispersed and developed recreation sites, there are instances of resource damage due to heavy use of popular dispersed campsites, cross-country off-highway vehicle use, frequent use near beaches, and heavily traveled destination trails. The degree of solitude can be less than expected in popular areas, as well. Some conflicts between different types of multiple use groups, such as horseback riders, hikers, off-highway vehicle users, backcountry skiers, mountain bikers, and snowmobile users, occur on trails and in multiple use areas.

Hunting and Fishing

Hunting and fishing remain important to Tribes, national forest visitors, and people who live throughout the region. The activities contribute to and diversify local economies. Activity levels have changed in recent years, with trends now indicating decreasing numbers of hunters and increasing numbers of people fishing on national forests.

Roads and Trails Access

Logging has decreased since the 1990s on the national forests in the Blue Mountains (Andrews and Kutara 2005). Associated road construction and maintenance associated with timber haul has also decreased. New, permanent road construction has markedly declined, and road system condition has deteriorated. Full maintenance of the transportation system has not been sustainable at the current funding level of the Forest Service. Consequently, the road maintenance budget has been prioritized for double-lane passenger vehicle roads, which are typically the most expensive and most highly traveled portions of the road system. With the focus shifting to maintaining higher-level roads for passenger car use, the deferred maintenance backlog for the remainder of the road system continues to grow. As the condition of the road system has deteriorated, concerns for public safety and resource damage have increased.

Funding for national forest road maintenance comes from annual appropriated funds and from competitive national programs funded by Federal Highway Administration. Funding from the Federal Highway Administration programs is typically used to address expensive road maintenance issues such as asphalt resurfacing or bridge replacement that exceed the normal budget capability of the forests. These large intermittent investments are necessary to keep higher service level roads serviceable but are not a substitute for annual operations and maintenance funding.

The allocated annual road maintenance budget for national forests in the Blue Mountains only provides approximately 20 percent of the required annual maintenance funds needed to adequately maintain the current open road system. The annual shortfall adds to an already substantially deferred maintenance backlog. Given the priority of maintaining passenger vehicle access roads, much of the deferred maintenance falls on level 1 (maintenance) and 2 (high clearance vehicles) roads, which represent 93 percent of the road network in the national forests of the Blue Mountains. Many of these roads are decades old with aging infrastructure that may require complete reconstruction to meet established standards, especially when considering they have not had maintenance for years due to the increasing maintenance intervals and growing backlog issues. The continued maintenance of an extensive road system creates many challenges. Roads in disrepair create safety issues and conflicts with protection for natural resources, especially for those such as water quality, aquatic species, and functioning wetland processes. Erosion from roads is known to be one of the largest contributors for degradation to water quality as well as a source of degradation to fish habitat and spawning areas.

Although related to recreational use, travel and access management planning is outside the scope of forest planning.

Portions of this report utilized the 2018 Blue Mountains Plan Revision Final Environmental Impact Statement to the extent practicable. The Blue Mountains used current and best available data and science relevant to the plan areas to inform the evaluation of conditions, trends and risks to sustainability for recreation and trails where available.

Recreation Settings and Opportunities

A recreation opportunity setting is the combination of physical, biological, social, and managerial conditions that give value to a place. Thus, an opportunity includes qualities provided by-nature (vegetation; landscape, topography, scenery), qualities associated with recreational use (levels and types of use), and conditions provided by management (developments, roads, regulations). By combining variations of these qualities and conditions, management can provide a variety of opportunities for recreationists. The settings, activities, and opportunities for obtaining experiences have been arranged along a continuum or spectrum divided into six classes: primitive, semi-primitive nonmotorized, semi-primitive motorized, roaded natural, rural, and urban (40 CFR 1505.2).

- **Primitive** Area is characterized by an essentially unmodified natural environment of fairly large size Interaction between users is very low and evidence of other users is minimal. The area is managed to be essentially free from evidence of human-induced restrictions and controls. Motorized use within the area is not permitted.
- Semi-primitive Nonmotorized Area is characterized by a predominantly natural or natural appearing environment of moderate to large size. Interaction between users is low, but there is often evidence of other users. The area is managed in such a way that minimum on-site controls and restrictions may be present but would be subtle. Motorized recreation use is not permitted, but local roads used for other resource management activities may be present on a limited basis. Use of such roads is restricted to minimize impacts on recreational experience opportunities.
- Semi-primitive Motorized Area is characterized by a predominantly natural or natural appearing environment of moderate to large size. Concentration of users is low, but there is often evidence of other users. The area is managed in such a way that minimum on-site controls and restrictions use of local primitive or collector roads with predominantly natural surfaces and trails suitable for motor bikes is permitted.
- **Roaded Natural** Area is characterized by predominantly natural-appearing environments with moderate evidence of the sights and sounds of man. Such evidence usually harmonizes with the natural environment. Interaction between users may be moderate to high, with evidence of other users prevalent. Resource modification and utilization practices are evident but harmonize with the natural environment. Conventional motorized use is allowed and incorporated into construction standards and design of facilities.
- **Rural** Area is characterized by substantially modified natural environment. Resource modification and utilization practices are to enhance specific recreation activities and to maintain vegetative cover and soil. Sights and sounds of humans are readily evident, and the interaction between users is often moderate to high. A considerable number of facilities are designed for use by a large number of people. Facilities are often provided for special activities. Moderate densities are provided far away from developed sites. Facilities for intensified motorized use and parking are available.
- **Urban** Area is characterized by a substantially urbanized environment, although the background may have natural appearing elements. Renewable resource modification and utilization practices are to enhance specific recreation activities. Vegetative cover is often exotic and manicured. Sights and sounds of humans, on-site, are predominant. Large numbers of users can be expected, both on site

and in nearby areas. Facilities for highly intensified motor use and parking are available with forms of mass transit often available to carry people throughout the site.

National Forests within the Blue Mountains provide a variety of recreation opportunities from highly developed downhill skiing facilities to remote wilderness. The recreation resources are described and managed in terms of recreation opportunities, using the recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS). The ROS inventory identified five physical/social settings on the three forests in the Blue Mountains. Within the ROS settings, the forests provide two principal types of recreation: developed recreation sites, in which activities are dependent on constructed facilities (such as recreation vehicle camping, downhill skiing, and recreational residences); and dispersed recreation, where the activities are not dependent on constructed facilities (such as hunting, fishing, and off-highway vehicle use). The following table displays the acres of forest lands in each ROS class.

National Forest	National Forest Primitive pr Non		Semi- Primitive Motorized	Roaded Natural	Roaded Modified	Rural
Malheur*	81,300	45,600	140,100	748,100	444,400	0
Umatilla	36,000	269,000	6,000	119,000	972,000	0
Wallowa- Whitman	590,815	269,000	260,200	985,600	242,100	1,500

Table 1. Acres of forest land within each ROS class.

* May not include Emigrant Creek Ranger District lands formerly administered by the Ochoco National Forest

The Blue Mountains national forests received 502,000 visits annually, as identified by the 2019 National Visitor Use Monitoring survey. The top five activities categories for the three national forests in the Blue Mountains were hiking/walking, viewing natural features, viewing wildlife, driving for pleasure and relaxing. These were activities that recreation visitors participated in, regardless of the primary purpose of the visit (USDA Forest Service, 2019).

Hunting was the most popular activity with 18 percent reporting it as their primary activity. Downhill skiing ranked second, with 11 percent of all visitors indicating it was the primary purpose of their visit. Hiking or walking, driving for pleasure, relaxing, gathering forest product, fishing and winter sports were indicated as primary visit purposes by 5 to 10 percent of visitors (USDA Forest Service, 2019).

The Blue Mountains experienced an increase in visitation in 2020-2021, partly due to COVID. Visitation has decreased since then but has remained slightly higher than pre-COVID levels.

Scenic Character

Scenic attributes, including identifiable patterns, distinct color, texture, form, and elements, such as aspen stands and rock formations, are derived from specific geological features and functioning ecosystems. These features provide a scenic identity and image that is valued as a backdrop for activities and experiences that create memories and meet expectations of Forest visitors (Bacon 1974 and Ryan 2005). People value the Blue Mountain national forests for their natural beauty,

Blue Mountains national forests Recreation Assessment Report – Draft for Discussion 2/6/24

undeveloped and undisturbed scenes, and rural western setting when visiting, recreating, or traveling locally. There are opportunities to view historical operations, ditches, and structures (i.e., erected by Civilian Conservation Corp) and observe traditional uses in current times (i.e., ranching facilities and pole fences). Mountainous environments and canyons create dynamic settings that contribute to the scenery of the forests. Strong landscape images often appreciated include the diverse plant communities present in the forefront at different elevations along with a multitude of geological features (i.e., rock outcrops and peaks in the background) being integrated with varying types of water features.

The Scenery Management System provides an overall framework for the orderly inventory, analysis and management of scenery. It is a tool for integrating the benefits, values, desires, and preferences regarding aesthetics and scenery for all levels of land management planning. Scenery is inventoried and placed into one of seven scenic classes with Scenic Class 1 being highly valued and distinctive and Scenic Class 7 being non-distinctive and valued the least. Each classification is determined by the combination of scenic attractiveness, viewpoint, viewing distance, and duration along with the frequency or number of viewers (USDA Forest Service 1995b). Determining this range of scenic classes allows managers to understand the social acceptability of any change in scenery. This step was completed during the 2018 Forest Plan Revision efforts. Scenic classes range from 1-5 on the Malheur National Forest with nearly half of the land classified as scenic class 2. The other half is dominantly scenic class 3 and 1, respectively, with only eight percent falling in scenic class 4 and 5. Classes range from 1-5 on the Umatilla National Forest with nearly 74 percent of the land classified as scenic class 2. The other 25 percent is dominantly scenic class 3 with only eight percent falling in scenic classes 4 and 5. Classes range from 1-5 on the Wallowa Whitman National Forest with nearly 82 percent of the land classified as scenic class 1-2. The remaining lands are either scenic class 3 or 5, no lands in Wallowa Whitman were classified as scenic class 4.

Scenic integrity and scenic stability are two indicators used to evaluate the condition of scenery resources. Scenic integrity addresses human caused disturbances and development that may detract from desired scenic character. Scenic stability addresses the relative stability of the valued scenic character and its scenic attributes. Further in-depth scenic character descriptions can be found in the Scenery Management System Handbook (USDA Forest Service 1995b).

Scenic Integrity was developed to measure the amount of visual disturbance that contrasts with and/or detracts from the natural or socially valued appearance in a landscape. Scenic integrity levels range from very high, where the valued scenery appears natural or unaltered to no integrity where the valued scenery appears natural or unaltered, low, very low and none.

The existing impacts to scenic integrity are predominately related to harvest activities dating before 1980. More recent harvest activities were designed to blend with natural appearing settings. Within the Blue mountains, approximately 15 percent of the landscape has a low or very low scenic Integrity level, where visual disturbances detract from the valued scenic character. An example is a vegetation harvest unit that appears distinctly geometric and unnatural. Twenty percent of the areas has a

moderate scenic integrity level, where openings in the vegetation are largely out of scale, but the edges are blended or shaped in a manner that appears somewhat natural. Fifty percent of the area has a high scenic integrity level, and 12 percent very high, where the valued scenic character appears intact with no detracting visual disturbances. The distribution of existing scenic integrity levels for each national forest is summarized in the following tables.

Existing Integrity Level	Scenic Class 1	Scenic Class 2	Scenic Class 3	Scenic Class 4	Scenic Class 5	Scenic Class 6	Scenic Class 7
High	41	54	56	75	68	88	75
Low	15	11	8	4	8	11	19
Moderate	28	34	35	20	24	1	5
Very high	16	0	0	0	0	0	0
Very low	1	2	1	0	1	0	0

Table 2. Distribution of existing scenic integrity levels (percent) for Malheur National Forest

Table 3. Dist	ribution of existing	g scenic integrity	v levels (percent) for	or Umatilla National Forest
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Existing Integrity Level	Scenic Class 1	Scenic Class 2	Scenic Class 3	Scenic Class 4	Scenic Class 5	Scenic Class 6	Scenic Class 7
High	31	60	53	55	54	75	69
Low	15	17	15	9	13	4	3
Moderate	6	21	30	35	31	20	27
Very high	47	0	0	0	0	0	0
Very low	1	2	2	1	2	1	1

Table 4. Distribution of existing scenic integrity levels	(percent) for Wallowa-Whitman National Forest
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Existing Integrity Level	Scenic Class 1	Scenic Class 2	Scenic Class 3	Scenic Class 4	Scenic Class 5	Scenic Class 6	Scenic Class 7
High	44	62	63	73	64	93	86
Low	11	13	13	8	15	2	2
Moderate	12	24	23	18	21	5	12
Very high	33	0	0	0	0	0	0
Very low	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Scenic Stability is an indicator for the SMS, introduced to specifically identify the ecological sustainability of the valued landscape character and its scenery attributes. Scenic stability is a consideration of the condition of valued scenery attributes identified in the landscape character description and an evaluation of whether the condition is within the historical range of variability. The condition of forested vegetation-related scenery attributes (pattern, stand structure and density, species composition) gives an indication of whether the ecosystem is functioning property and if the vegetation components of valued scenery can be sustained. If conditions are outside of historical range of variability or are trending away from that range, then it is likely that scenery attributes are at a greater risk of decline or loss. Scenic stability levels range from very high, where all dominant and

minor scenery attributes of the valued landscape character are present and are likely to be sustained, to none where all dominant scenery attributes of the valued landscape character are absent or seriously threatened by their conditions and ecosystem stressors. Levels include very high, high, moderate, low, very low and no stability (unstable). The distribution of existing scenic stability classes is summarized in the following table for the three national forests.

National Forest and Scenic Class	Unstable	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
MAL - 1	0.54	10.75	39.27	49.17	0.19	0.08
UMA - 1	0.42	18.98	44.66	35.92	0.03	0.00
WAW - 1	0.05	3.92	14.10	79.70	2.22	0.00
MAL - 2	0.03	9.84	50.66	39.41	0.05	0.00
UMA - 2	0.30	12.92	47.36	39.39	0.04	0.00
WAW - 2	0.01	5.03	18.15	75.65	1.16	0.00
MAL - 3	0.02	9.79	61.66	28.50	0.03	0.00
UMA - 3	0.11	21.22	50.05	28.61	0.00	0.00
WAW - 3	0.02	9.66	17.17	70.65	2.50	0.00
MAL - 4	0.05	15.57	54.85	29.43	0.10	0.01
UMA - 4	0.48	14.26	38.21	46.74	0.26	0.05
WAW - 4	0.27	0.55	4.23	84.12	9.95	0.89
MAL - 5	0.17	19.10	57.81	22.75	0.17	0.00
UMA - 5	0.03	24.44	44.11	31.27	0.15	0.00
WAW - 5	0.08	10.43	12.38	77.03	0.07	0.00
WAW - 6	0.00	0.00	0.00	82.66	14.59	2.75
WAW - 7	0.14	0.00	0.00	73.89	16.48	9.49

Table 5. distribution of existing scenic stability classes.

Key Benefits to People

The three forests with the Blue Mountains are important local and national recreation destinations. Almost all residents of Oregon and Washington participate in outdoor recreation in some form. In addition to providing enjoyment and adventure, outdoor activities help bolster the recreation economy and provide health benefits which reduces medical expenditures for individuals. Recreation and related tourism, especially during hunting season, is a major component of the rural economy in northeast Oregon and southeastern Washington.

Scenic qualities of the national forests represent the backdrop for the communities of the Blue Mountains and encompass the attractive recreational aspects of living in eastern Oregon and southeastern Washington. The high-quality scenic environment is vital to the communities that use and support the Blue Mountain national forests.

Risks and Stressors

The 2019-2023 Oregon Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), entitled Outdoor Recreation in Oregon: Responding to Demographic and Societal Change, addresses five important demographic and societal changes facing outdoor recreation providers, including the Forest Service, in the coming years including: an aging population, an increasingly diverse population, lack of youth engagement in outdoor recreation, an underserved low-income population; and the health benefits of physical activity. A statewide survey was conducted in 2017 titled "2017 Oregon Resident Outdoor Recreation Survey" and was used for supporting data in the 2019-2023 Plan. The survey reported 95% of Oregonians participated in at least one outdoor recreation activity. With the rise in popularity of outdoor recreation comes the risk of over-crowding outdoor sites. Crowded recreation sites can diminish the visitor experience and damage or disturb natural resources. Climate change could also impact recreational use. Shorter seasons for winter recreation activities and abnormally long wildfire seasons in the warmer months could change the intensity and locations in which visitors recreate. Poor air quality in areas experiencing longer wildfire seasons and more smoke could concentrate visitors to areas with less or no smoke which risks over-crowding. Climate Management considerations and actions must address this risk/stressor while maintaining a balance of recreation and conservation.

Recreation participation in Oregon has been shown to underrepresent racial minorities, people with limited incomes, and people with disabilities. Land managers must seek out ways to provide equitably accessible recreation to all.

Economic and cultural barriers to participating in recreation on National Forest System land exist. Some racial or ethnic groups voice safety concerns in outdoor recreation spaces. Groups can also have less knowledge of recreation opportunities and feel less ownership of the public land in their area due to historic disenfranchisement of some communities in the United States. Minority groups may prefer to recreate in larger groups for cultural, language, or safety reasons or in different ways. For example, some studies conclude that Latino recreationists may prefer to use outdoor spaces for more socially or family focused activities than traditional outdoor spaces allow for, and may prefer to visit recreation spaces with larger, open, amenity-forward areas. (Chavez & Olsen, 2009) While these types of areas do exist, recreation management may have traditionally focused on amenities for individual recreationists or small groups. More recent studies show that even as interest grows in more traditionally individualist, wilderness outdoor activities amongst Latino recreationists, there is still a focus on involving socialization and cultural storytelling in those activities (Flores & Kuhn, 2018). These diverse needs of this and other communities should be considered when planning for recreation management.

Minority racial and ethnicity status are key factors to environmental justice, especially concerning wildfire risk. Indigenous, Hispanic, and Black communities face more wildfire risk in high wildlandurban interface communities. In fact, indigenous communities may face the highest wildfire risk of any community due their proximity to National Forest boundaries. Additionally, fires may especially effect indigenous communities' ability to practice their right to subsistence harvesting and cultural

Blue Mountains national forests Recreation Assessment Report – Draft for Discussion 2/6/24

practice on culturally important lands. Fire is important to many indigenous cultures and forest management should consult closely with local indigenous tribes about ideal fire management conditions to promote the success of cultural practices.

Knowledge and histories from indigenous groups can share their traditional ecological knowledge to help land management decisions. The Federal Government has also committed to including indigenous people and stewardship traditions of harvesting, foraging, and hunting in any management plans.

The surrounding area of Umatilla National Forest has a higher average of Hispanic/Latino populations and non-white populations than areas surrounding the Malheur and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. An effort is underway to understand unique community needs and provide comprehensive translation materials and programs for the planning process.

In many areas, the long-term stability of scenery resources is at risk of large-scale impacts due to past wildfire suppression and timber harvest practices and exacerbated by the effects of climate change. The resultant conditions of homogenous, overly dense forests of non-fire-resistant species heavily laden with fuels put scenery resources at risk from uncharacteristically large, stand-replacing wildfires, and insect and disease disturbances.

Sixty-three percent of scenic class 1 has moderate scenic stability, meaning that most dominant scenery attributes of the valued landscape are present but there are conditions that pose a threat to the stability of the attributes, such as large-scale wildfire or disturbance from insects and diseases. Less than 5 percent of scenic class 1 has high scenic stability, meaning that the dominant scenery attributes are present and are likely to be sustained.

Management activities on the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa Whitman National forests play an integral part in the high-quality scenery of this region.

Trends and Drivers

The Blue Mountain National Forests have experienced significant changes in recreation since the forests were first established and conditions continue to change from those identified in the 1990 forest plans. Initially, recreation was light and concentrated in just a few popular areas, with fewer campgrounds or developed sites. A boom in recreation occurred after WWII through the early to mid-1960s which placed additional demands on the quantity and quality of recreation facilities.

Since the 1970s interest in and the appreciation of the environment has increased national forest recreation visits and has shifted activities and expectations. Technical advancements in motorized vehicles (all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, snowmobiles, etc.) allow these types of vehicles to travel to places where they were unable to as recently as ten years ago. The invention and advancement of the mountain bike, and more recently, the electric mountain bike (e-bike) have added new uses that were not a component of the 1990 forest plans. These and other issues have led to a more crowded

14

recreation experience during peak seasons, increasing demands on other natural resources and generated conflicts among users themselves.

The 2017 SCORP Survey identified these top priorities for future needs from Oregon respondents (statewide): cleaner restrooms, soft surface walking trails, more restrooms, natural play areas, nature and wildlife viewing areas and public access to waterways. In addition, providing more free-of-charge recreation opportunities was the most important agency management action identified, followed closely by ensuring clean and well-maintained facilities and developing walking/hiking trails.

Risks to scenic stability are primarily from past management activities such as wildfire suppression over the past century and timber harvest practices (i.e., clear cuts) before the 1980s. These activities resulted in conditions such as homogenous, overly dense forests with non-fire-resistant species and forests heavily laden with fuels. Harvest activities since the 1980s have been designed to blend with natural settings and subsequent impacts have been less severe.

Information Needs

In 1995, the Forest Service developed an updated version of its direction for scenery management (the "then" called Visual Management System), and introduced the Scenery Management System. Scenery resources should be analyzed consistent with the most current handbook "Landscape Aesthetics, A Handbook for Scenery Management". The 2018 withdrawn plans used a mix of both the Visual Management System (VMS) and Scenery Management System (SMS). All map products used during the development of the SMS inventory should be reviewed and completed if missing. To eliminate confusion, only the SMS should be used, rather than a hybrid between both systems.

Scenery inventory should be updated. The recommended timeframe for updating the scenery inventory is prior to or at initiation of Forest land and resource management plan revisions. The applicable scenery inventory components in the Forest land and resource management planning process are landscape character, scenic integrity, scenic class, and constituent information.

The portion of Emigrant Creek Ranger District on Malheur National Forest, previously administered by the Ochoco National Forest needs to be incorporated into the Blue Mountains ROS inventory.

The 2024-2028 SCORP plan, currently being prepared will help establish priorities for future spending and outdoor recreation development. This report will provide documentation of the state of outdoor recreation in Oregon.

Consistency in recording data in GIS is important. All corporate datasets should be reviewed and updated as needed for accuracy and consistency across forests.

A Recreation Niche should be developed for the Blue Mountains. This would provide a broad overview of the forest's recreation resources, program priorities by area and unique opportunities. The niche description should include who visits, what draws most visitors, what makes these forests a recreation destination and what features attracts visitors.

Key Findings

No significant issues related to scenic resources were identified during scoping or the need for change analysis conducted during the 2018 Forest Plan Revision efforts. The risk of high-severity disturbance to scenery resources is a concern but not a significant issue.

Results from the 2019 National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) report indicates that visitors found scenery and the condition of the environment to be highly satisfactory and highly important to their recreation experience across the Blue Mountains.

Access and Travel Management Planning is outside the scope of Forest Planning. Malheur and Wallowa Whitman National Forests intend to complete Travel Management Planning after Forest Plan Revision is complete.

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